



Our editorial: Work toward stronger jobs future

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Gov. Rick Snyder has some unfinished business before he leaves Lansing next year, and his commitment to improving job opportunities for Michiganders remains a top priority. That's a good use of his time and energy — and will leave a lasting impact.

In a tight job market, in which Michigan is competing with its neighboring states for outside investment, the state has to prepare its workers with the skills needed for these high-tech jobs. A skilled workforce is essential to attracting companies, and an increased focus on career and technical education could help meet the demand.

The jobs outlook has improved greatly during Snyder's tenure, with unemployment declining from more than 11 percent when he took office to reach a low of 3.8 percent this month — the lowest rate in 17 years.

Yet many good-paying jobs remain unfilled in the state, and Snyder wants to tackle that gap through better career training and counseling. More than 100,000 jobs are available right now, many of which are in the professional trades, Snyder said Wednesday during an interview with The Detroit News editorial board.

"It's an understated number," he added.

In the past six years, 40,000 jobs were created in the construction trades alone, Snyder said.

Through various state programs, residents are getting the training they need to step into these positions. But more can and should be done, especially when it comes to attracting youth to available job opportunities.

In recent years, the state has become more involved in schools, encouraging students to consider STEM (science, technology, math and engineering) fields through programs like FIRST Robotics.

An initiative introduced earlier this summer could have even more impact.

The Michigan Career Pathways Alliance seeks to bring educators and employers together and help students discover career possibilities — starting as early as elementary school. Snyder encouraged Roger Curtis, state director of Talent and Economic Development, to partner with state Superintendent Brian Whiston, and they put together a series of recommendations.

"We're working to change the perception of trades in schools," Curtis said in May. "All the gears are in place."

Some of the proposed changes will need legislative action, and Snyder should work with lawmakers in the fall to get this done.

Similarly, school guidance counselors need better training to help students seek out these opportunities. A bill that passed the House and is now in the Senate would set additional guidelines for counselors.

The sooner these measures are put in place, the better, as it takes time to move a new generation into available jobs.

"The pipeline doesn't fill really fast," Snyder said. "In terms of ramping up, it's working. Long-term, I'm excited. We've planted seeds in really good things."

A program starting this fall in Detroit could serve as a model. Detroit Public Schools Community District's Randolph Career and Technical Center is getting a much-needed makeover with outside business investment. The school is expected to boost student enrollment in skilled trades programs, as well as host training for adults after school.

For too long, students have heard in school that a four-year college degree is their only option. It's not. Good careers are in reach with a two-year degree or a certificate program. Snyder should continue building these alternative career pathways.